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ABSTRACT: Review Paper for Submission to The Journal of Journal of Applied Research in Developmental Disabilities

CBT for Autistic Individuals with Intellectual Disability Reviewing the Literature and Identifying Next Steps for the Field

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Individuals with co-occurring ASD and intellectual disability are a complex and underserved population who are at particular risk for mental health disorders. While communication and behavioral difficulties can make psychiatric assessment challenging, psychiatric comorbidity, such as anxiety and depression, occurs at very high rates (Skwerer et al., 2019). While there are many barriers to accessing mental health treatment for this population, the most significant barrier may be the lack of evidence-based, manualized interventions (Vereenoghe & Langdon, 2013). Thus, clinicians have limited guidance on how to proceed with treatment, placing the families they serve at a disadvantage and contributing to the marginalization of people with ASD and intellectual disability. The present review aimed to examine the existing literature on cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) interventions for mental health concerns in autistic individuals with co-occurring intellectual disability across the lifespan. We also aimed to make recommendations about next steps for developing tailored CBT interventions for this population. Four studies met the inclusion criteria and were evaluated against quality indicators for experimentally controlled research. Next, the efficacy of each treatment approach was assessed using established criteria for defining empirically supported therapies. Results indicated that there is a striking lack of research on evidence-based interventions for mental health concerns in autistic individuals with intellectual disability. Interventions that do exist often focus solely on behavior management or exposure-based treatments alone without efforts to incorporate adapted approaches to cognitive treatment elements. Establishing CBT interventions for this population capitalizes on a well-established evidence base for CBT and on existing clinician skillsets, offering the potential to increase access to quality mental health care more quickly. The present review highlights the urgent need for rigorous intervention research on mental health interventions for autistic individuals with intellectual disability.